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SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA, NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2019
TAGS: [PBTS](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: CONTINUED TUNNELING IN EAST JERUSALEM

REF: JERUSALEM 292

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubenstein,
per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The settler organization ELAD continues to excavate a tunnel under the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, according to NGO sources, despite a stop-work order from Israeli courts. The organization is beginning to publicize its efforts, leading Muslim leaders to criticize the project and call for an immediate halt. On September 21, Israeli courts may rule on whether to maintain the stop-work order. End Summary.

Background on Tunneling in Silwan

¶2. (SBU) Since the 1990s, ELAD has spearheaded an effort to excavate the area south of Jerusalem's Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Silwan. ELAD began a substantial tunneling project in the area in 2002, underneath large portions of privately-owned Palestinian land. In 2008, Poloff accompanied a member of the Silwan Committee for the Defense of Land and Property to two homes that sustained damage during excavations. Since that time, ELAD activists and Palestinian residents have clashed over periodic excavation, and tensions remain high. Skirmishes erupted on September 11 between Israeli authorities and Palestinians in Silwan after an Israeli opened fire on Palestinians gathered in the area.

Recent Press Exposes Ongoing Work

¶3. (C) On September 17, a local Israeli television station broadcast a story showing ELAD workers in the tunnels, as well as blueprints for future excavations. Separately, Peace Now activist Hagit Ofra provided Poloff with a video she filmed inside the tunnel showing substantial architectural reinforcements, and electrical and ventilation systems. Ofra said excavations have continued despite an Israeli court-issued order on March 16, 2008, to stop work.

¶4. (C) Although much of the work occurs underneath Palestinian homes, Ofra said, Palestinian residents of Silwan are not allowed access to the tunnels. Poloff noted during a recent tour of the area that ELAD's operations are concealed from the street and secured with armed guards, surveillance cameras, fences, and locks. Ofra said ELAD officials have previously expressed a desire to extend the tunnel project underneath the Silwan mosque complex. Separately, Jerusalem attorney Daniel Seidemann told Poloff on September 17 that the longest of the tunnels is roughly 260 yards so far, with 260 additional yards planned.

¶5. (C) On September 8, Ofra said, the Jerusalem Magistrate accepted claims by Silwan residents that most of the excavation was illegally planned because it lacked the

required construction permits. Ofra said the courts will decide on September 21 whether to continue the stop-work order.

16. (U) The head of the High Islamic Council in Jerusalem, Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, issued a fatwa on September 17 calling for an end to the tunneling, which runs close to the al-Aqsa Mosque foundation. Sabri said that fatwas had already been issued prohibiting Muslim families from accepting compensation for homes threatened with demolition or from selling Palestinian-owned land to settlers.

RUBINSTEIN